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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003041

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/18/2018  
TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE PLANNING MOVING FORWARD  
  
REF: BAGHDAD 2829

Classified By: By Political Minister Counselor Robert S. Ford, for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The senior officials responsible for organizing the MFA's Christian Conference are confident that the Prime Minister's Office will soon approve their proposed list of planning committee members. In the meantime, they are moving forward with drafting the conference's agenda, which will focus on developing concrete, implementable strategies to address economic development, anti-discrimination legal reform, and other areas of concern to Iraq's Christians. The MFA plans to invite non-Christian minority and Muslim representatives to the conference, and is considering foreign participation. End summary.

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Identifying Themes, Planning the Budget  
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12. (C) Deputy Foreign Minister Labid Abbawi and MFA Director of Policy Planning Mohamed Al-Hakim briefed Deputy Political Counselor September 18 on ongoing MFA planning for its Christian Conference (reftel). Abbawi said a list of planning committee members had been developed and sent to the Prime Minister for approval, which he expected soon. In the meantime, Al-Hakim, who has immediate oversight of conference preparations, is working on the conference agenda and budgeting. The MFA still plans to hold the event before the end of the year.

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A Four-Topic Agenda  
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13. (C) Al-Hakim said the MFA currently envisages a four-section agenda for the conference. The first section would deal with problems faced by Iraqi Christians, including their limited participation in national and local government bodies. In this part, Al-Hakim hopes that Christians in Iraq, as well as those living abroad, would voice their thoughts and proposals for change.

14. (C) The second section would focus on how to stem the tide of Christian emigration from Iraq. Al-Hakim lamented that Christians continue to leave the country, and that almost none of the Iraqis who have returned are Christian. He said that the decision by Western countries, especially Germany and Sweden, to expedite asylum requests for Christians vice other Iraqis has created an incentive for continued Christian emigration. Noting the historical and cultural importance of Iraq's Christians, Al-Hakim, a Muslim, said strategies need to be developed to improve conditions so that Christians would remain in Iraq.

15. (C) The third section would focus on ways to create new business and employment opportunities for Christians. Al-Hakim noted that Christians are often targeted for abuse or attacks because of their association with "certain kinds of businesses," i.e., selling alcohol. Al-Hakim believes

that increasing economic opportunities in Christian areas will provide an incentive for Christians to remain in Iraq.

¶6. (C) The fourth section would deal with achieving demographic equilibrium by integrating Christians in all areas of Iraq, from Basrah to Mosul. Abbawi called for GOI action to "activate" Christian participation in Iraqi society. To this end, Abbawi said the GOI needs to examine its current management of Christian issues and consider what actions it needs to take, including adopting non-discriminatory policies and legal reform, to achieve full Christian integration.

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Participation Still Open  
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¶7. (C) According to Al-Hakim, the makeup of conference participants is still under discussion. He said the MFA is hoping for participation from all of Iraq's religious communities, including Muslim clerics, and is weighing the possibility of foreign participation, including Europeans as well as Christians from other Arab countries such as Lebanon and Syria.

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Aiming For More Than a Talk-Fest  
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¶8. (C) Al-Hakim stressed the MFA,s determination that the Christian Conference not be "a conference on paper." The goal is practical, tangible results. He said he wants the

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conference to produce concrete action plans that the GOI will be able to quickly implement, and thus demonstrate to Iraqi Christians as well as foreign observers the GOI,s seriousness about its commitment to creating an Iraq in which all ethnic and religious minorities enjoy equal rights and status.

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Comment  
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¶9. (C) The Christian Conference is a work in progress, but appears to be proceeding. We are encouraged by the MFA,s emphasis on establishing an agenda designed to produce practical, do-able action plans to address Christian concerns. Despite Al-Hakim,s forward-leaning comments on foreign participation in the conference, this is and will remain a sensitive issue for the GOI. We will continue to monitor planning for the conference.  
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